

T.S. Eliot

T.S. Eliot's critical essay 'Tradition and the individual talent' was published in 1919 (The egoist) and in his own work in 1920 (The sacred wood). It is interesting to note that Eliot's essays which endorsed views that were distinct from those of Virginia Woolf were published around the same time as her works. This is indicative of the diversity of literary thought that emerged in post war European society.

Eliot had some similarities with Woolf, however. Both were fiction as well as non-fiction. Their fiction became a vehicle to understand their non-fiction and vice-versa. Both attempted to pave new ways of thought and writing for contemporary and future generations of authors. However some perspectives put forth by Eliot are quite contrary to those presented by Woolf. In the essay 'traditional and individual talent', Eliot presents:

- His concept of tradition
- His emphasis on the need for individual talent
- His theory of impersonality

The Concept of Tradition

Eliot's literary tradition was meant to be a fluid entity. It was not something out there waiting to be mimicked or imitated rather it is a legacy, an emblem of the past guiding the present and the future. Tradition was not something frozen in time but rather a constantly evolving, dynamic body of work. Eliot says that the word traditional has been subjected to a lot of criticism. It is looked down upon as anachronistic and superficial.

According to Eliot however, tradition symbolises documentation and an awareness of the whole of literature (In Eliot's case the literature of Europe). In order to write something new, writers must first be aware of what already has been written.

Eliot emphasises that poetry does not exist in a vacuum. All art is in conversation with itself and those of the past and each new generation expands or alters the literary character. As part of this essay, Eliot opened up a new paradigm in literary criticism when he looked at the text as an independent autonomous entity in itself. Thus Eliot contributed to the founding principles of the new criticism movement.

In this essay Eliot emphasises upon the separation of the art from the artist thereby proposing that tradition is not imitation but rather the skill of recognizing, honing and extending intellectual and literary contexts. Eliot wanted contemporary writers to be acquainted with the works that predefined literary canons. The biography of the author was of little or no importance; the greatness of her work lays in its stylistic and semantic elements which were essentially timeless.

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Theory of Impersonality

Very Important

- Eliot's theory of impersonality is one of the most influential concepts in his essay. As part of this, he emphasises that poetry should be impersonal and distinct from the personality of the writer.
- As opposed to Wordsworth, Eliot claims that poetry must not be an outlet for "poet's personal emotions and experiences". In an oft-quoted line, Eliot says "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not an expression of personality but an escape from personality."
- Eliot explains this in his context of tradition. He says that a poet must have well developed historical sense. He must have a special awareness of the past. Once this awareness is achieved, it will erase any trace of the poet's personality. The poet then will become a mere medium of expression. Thus, Eliot focuses on objectivity in writing as opposed to the romantic notion of subjectivity.

→ According to Eliot, good literature is not an expression of personality, but rather the extinction of the personality. Once the poet achieves special awareness of tradition, he uses this knowledge and integrates it with language and linguistic techniques to create an entirely new product. (In this case, a poem.) While doing so, he ensures that his personal emotions do not interfere in the process of creation. Again, this stands in sharp contrast with Wordsworth's view that poetry is a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. In order to explain the theory of impersonality, he uses a chemical analogy.

The chemicals required to create sulphurous acid are simply oxygen and sulphur dioxide. However, when these two are mixed, they do not form the acid. When they are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form a sulphurous acid. In the newly formed acid, platinum remains neutral and unchanged. Therefore, just as platinum acts as a catalyst for the formation of the acid, so must a writer be a catalyst of the finished product, leaving no trace of the individual emotion or personality.

The Individual Talent (Advice to Authors)

The individual talent of a writer is dependent on his ability to combine a sense of tradition w/ impersonality in the process of writing.

Eliot's concept of individual talent once again, highlights impersonality and the sacrifice of the poet's personal emotion. (depersonalisation) ← another word

In order to be a good writer, he says, an individual must become a receptacle in that, he must become conscious of what is happening around him, and what has happened around him in the past in society as well as the world at large. He must be well read, and have a deep knowledge of tradition.

Equipped with this knowledge, he must become a medium, a catalyst who facilitates production and reaction. He himself should not be present in the final product.

He emphasises that in a work of literature, there is no place for a writer to be overly emotional or personal. Similarly, he should also not try to control the reaction that his work evokes from the public (in espousing this view Eliot forges new trends in new criticism, structuralism and post-structuralism)

Eliot also speaks of art emotion, which arises when the immense focus of a writer meets his awareness of his position as a medium. The greatest of a work has to be measured against tradition; both, in the way in which the work is reflective of tradition and how tradition responds to it, either by expanding, altering, or disrupting itself.

In citing Shakespeare, Eliot expresses that a writer's reputation notwithstanding his works too are judged apropos works preceding and following.

'The function of criticism' can be considered as a companion text to *Tradition and the Individual Talent*. Published in 1923, it was probably written as an appendix to his earlier much controversial work *Tradition and the Individual Talent*.

As the title suggests, in this essay Eliot focuses on the role of a critic. He also makes a distinction between creative and critical work. He begins the essay by citing his view from *'Tradition... talent'*:

He once again speaks of tradition and how any work assumes its meaning in relation to larger tradition of which it is a part.

(This interestingly is one the founding principles of a literary movt. that gained mileage in the 1950s and 60s, ie structuralism)

In this sense, Eliot introduces the system of order in literary writing and expands it to criticism too. A good writer he says, is someone who surrenders himself to the shared unconscious of other writers and artists.

A second grade writer/artist feels the need to assert his/her individuality in a vacuum. A nuanced writer will depersonalise himself from the process and create a work which taken on a life of its own.

Eliot's "the function of criticism" was written as a response to ^{John} Middleton Murry's work on romanticism. In this essay Murry has opposed Eliot's view, particularly those on tradition. He said "In England, there never has been any Classicism worth talking about. We've had classics, but no classicism. And all our classics are Romantic. That is to say, the decorum that the great English writers naturally observed is the one thing fetched out of the depths in themselves. It is not opposed by tradition or authority."

This essay is divided in 4 sections

- 1. Revision of views in Tradition ... talent*
- 2. Opposition to Munsey's views*
- 3. Emphasis on opposition to Romanticism*
- 4. Criticism and its functions*

1. Revision of views in Tradition ... talent

Eliot reexplains the importance of tradition through writing and understanding poetry. He reinstates that newer works should make room for themselves by altering tradition. For Eliot, tradition was not something that demanded surrender or subordination. The knowledge of tradition in fact, could make room for experimentation.

Role of a critic

Eliot enlists the qualities of a critic in this essay:

- a) must have a highly developed sense of fact
- b) should have vast knowledge of the technical aspects of the work.
- c) should use the tools of comparison and analysis extensively.
- d) put forth their knowledge of a work in a simple manner and facilitate different interpretations from readers.
- e) use their skill to inform, educate and correct the taste of general readership

functions of criticism

First makes a clear difference between creative writing/art
creative work/art can exist in their own states. They need not have a specific
end goal or purpose. Art can just exist for us to take pleasure from it
To think about life in general, to deliberate about the world around us
or to simply put our worries to side and indulge in a different world
for sometime

Therefore art has autotelic value. Autotelism is the belief that a work of art
especially a work of literature is an end in itself or provides its own
justification and does not exist to serve a moral or didactic purpose.

As opposed to this, critical writing is dependent on creative writing. Criticism cannot
be treated as an independent entity. Similarly, it also needs to have a purpose
First emphasised upon 2 specific objectives: 1) Elucidation of the works
of art; 2) correction of public taste.

opposition to Murry's views and emphasis on opposition to Romanticism

In his essay, Murry had presented his views on Classicism & Romanticism, emphasising how they differ very greatly from each other. No one, he said, could follow both at one time. Murry compared classicism to the Catholic culture which believed in discipline & obedience to an objective authority outside the individual.

Classicism too called for an allegiance to objective principles outside itself. This he said, was a feature of the French. Romanticism on the other hand, depended on the inner worlds of an individual, and had no restriction to follow any outside authority or fixed rules and traditions. This he said was more of a feature of the English.

Until here, Eliot agreed with Murry. He agreed w/ the differentiation btw Classicism & Romanticism, he also agreed that no single author could follow both. Then he disagreed w/ all other views of Murry.

Eliot's strongest opposition was to Murry's opinion, on Romanticism as a method of criticism. He stated that the concept of inner voice was like advocating doing whatever one likes without any sort of formal guidance. This could lead to confusion & chaos. Without an outside system guiding us, individual freedom also collapses. So, while classicism is complete, Romanticism is fragmented. While classicism is mature (nuanced) Romanticism is immature. While classicism is orderly, Romanticism is disorderly or chaotic. Thus, classicism & Romanticism cannot have the same degree of value as methods of criticism.

Eliot subjects Munif's views to ridicule. He states that criticism's function is to discover some common principles for perfection in art. This function could be truly served with obedience to the laws & tradition of art which have been derived from the experience of ages. Therefore someone believing in the validity of inner voice as a method of criticism could not truly value criticism.

In the fourth part, Eliot brings in his perceptive distinction between critical & creative works. He starts off by criticizing Matthew Arnold's vague distinction b/w the 2 terms. He says that while creative writing can be and ought to be critical, critical work must not be creative. The critical labour involved in creative writing is in 'sifting, combining, constructing, expurgating, correcting and testing.' A good writer is not an unconscious artist but someone who has access to the accumulated wisdom of tradition and can hone his own individual talent while keeping this tradition in purview. A good critic then is one who can deconstruct and explicate the obvious as well as the more layered or hidden aspects in the process of critical labour. This is why he says the most important faculty of a good critic is his highly developed sense of fact. Eliot upholds what he calls 'workshop criticism' (refer above). He rejects creative criticism and impressionistic criticism.